

The Experiences of Security Industry Contractors Working in Iraq

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Katy Messenger, DClinPsy, Lorna Farquharson, DClinPsy, Pippa Stallworthy, DClinPsy, Paul Cawkill, MSc, and Neil Greenberg, MD

Objective: To explore the occupational experiences of private security contractors working in a war zone and how it impacts on their mental health. **Methods:** Semistructured interviews were conducted with seven contractors employed by a large UK-based private security company. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts. Participants also completed the 12-item General Health Questionnaire and the Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist. **Results:** Four overarching themes emerged: the appeal of the job; vulnerability; keep going; and seeking help for stress in the workplace. No clinically significant levels of distress were reported. **Conclusions:** Contractors are frequently exposed to stressors known to increase risk of psychiatric difficulty in military personnel. A number of potential protective factors were identified. Only a minority of participants were open to seeking help for mental health difficulties.

Armed private security contractors have been employed in conflicts dating back to the American Revolution, but the extent of their employment in Iraq has been unprecedented.¹ The number of private security contractors in Iraq peaked in 2007, with estimates of more than 30,000 active personnel in country, before receding to just more than 11,000 in 2009.¹ Nevertheless, recent speculation suggests that the United States is planning to more than double the number of private security contractors in Iraq as a result of the draw down of troops from the country,² and contracting trends indicate that the number of personnel in Afghanistan is also likely to increase.¹ Most contractors have considerable prior military experience and are frequently called upon to carry out a variety of high-risk tasks previously undertaken by military personnel, including convoy duty and the close protection of individuals at risk of suffering harm. Such tasks are often highly dangerous, and they incur significant risk of death and injury.³

Numerous studies carried out with military personnel have helped to inform our understanding of the mental health consequences of working in war zones. Psychiatric difficulties such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety disorders,

and substance use disorder have been found to be common among military personnel.^{4,5} Although not the only mental health consequence of working in war zones, much of the research carried out with combat-exposed populations has focused specifically on PTSD.⁶ Posttraumatic stress disorder has been found to be one of the most common mental health problems experienced by military personnel, with approximately 20% of US troops reporting significant levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms after deployment⁴ and up to 6% of UK personnel engaged in combat duties.^{7,7a} It is characterized by feelings of intense fear, helplessness, or horror and symptoms of reexperiencing, avoidance, and hyperarousal.⁸

A wealth of research has demonstrated the association between both objective and subjective aspects of exposure to combat during deployment and PTSD.^{9,10} Other aspects of the deployment experience that have been found to be associated with mental health outcomes include the pattern of deployments¹¹ and low-magnitude stressors, such as poor living arrangements.¹² In addition to circumstances encountered in the war zone, an increasing body of research emphasizes the importance of predeployment and postdeployment factors in mitigating the effect of combat stress. Indeed, predeployment factors, such as previous exposure to trauma¹³ as well as poor psychological adjustment prior to trauma exposure,¹⁴ have also been found to be associated with PTSD in both the military and general populations. Postdeployment factors, such as additional life stressors¹⁵ and limited availability of social support,^{14,16} have also consistently been found to be associated with an increased risk of psychiatric difficulty.

Although numerous studies have furthered our understanding of risk and resilience factors for PTSD among military personnel, there has been a notable paucity of research conducted on contractors. Given what is known about the mental health consequences of working in war zones, it seems likely that contractors may be at risk of developing PTSD and other mental health difficulties. Indeed, previous research does suggest that a significant minority of contractors report psychological distress.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it also seems likely that there could be potentially important differences between the experiences of contractors and military personnel, which could have implications for their mental health. This study aimed to address the lack of research in this area by investigating the specific demands and unique experiences of contractors working in war zones. The study also aimed to explore attitudes about help seeking for mental health difficulties among this population. Because of the phenomenological nature of the research aims and the paucity of existing research with this population, it was decided that it would be most appropriate to adopt a qualitative methodology using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

METHODS

Design

The central means of collecting the data was semistructured interviews, and the IPA was carried out with the interview transcripts. The IPA typically uses semistructured interviews to further

From the Department of Psychology (Drs Messenger and Farquharson), Royal Holloway, University of London, Surrey; Traumatic Stress Service (Dr Stallworthy), Springfield University Hospital, London; Human Systems Group (Mr Cawkill), Defence Science & Technology Laboratory, Portsmouth; and Academic Centre for Defence Mental Health (Dr Greenberg), King's College, University of London, London, United Kingdom.

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The last author has provided clinical assessments and infrequent psychological health training for the company from which the subjects came but was not paid at all for any activity related to this research. No other potential conflicts of interest exist.

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Address correspondence to Neil Greenberg, MD, Academic Centre for Defence Mental Health, Weston Education Centre, Cutcombe Rd, London SE5 9RJ, United Kingdom (sososanta@aol.com).

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an understanding of the participants' lived experience and aims to provide an in-depth exploration of how individuals make sense of their experiences.¹⁸ In addition, two standardized measures were included in the design to provide a quantitative indication of the level of psychological distress experienced by participants at the time of interview.

Participants

The participants were private security contractors employed by a large private security company based in the United Kingdom. To be eligible for inclusion in the study:

1. Participants have been working as private security contractors in Iraq on either convoy duty or protective security detail.
2. Participants have been working in this type of role in Iraq for a minimum of 6 months.
3. Contractors who were not fluent were not invited to take part in the study because of the lack of access to interpreting services and the increased potential for bias that this would introduce into the analysis.¹⁹

The sample size was determined by the chosen method of analysis. It was intended that between 5 and 10 participants would be recruited on the basis of recommendations in the literature about sample sizes in studies using the IPA.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it was also recognized that the actual number of participants recruited would be dependent upon several factors, including sample availability and the richness of the individual cases.²⁰

The final sample consisted of seven private security contractors who had been working in Iraq for an average of 3 years (range, 1 to 10 years). All participants were white British, with the exception of one contractor who was of mixed race. The average age of participants was 38 years (range, 26 to 46 years), and all participants were men. All participants had previously been employed in the military for an average of 11.5 years (range, 5 to 22 years). Four participants had previously been deployed to Iraq during their military careers. Although no comparative data were provided, the Human Resources Department was of the opinion that the sample recruited in the current study was largely representative of the wider group of expatriate contractors working for the company.

Data Collection and Analysis

Ethical approval was granted by Royal Holloway University of London Ethics Committee. The private security company also gave permission for employees to participate in the research, and recruitment was carried out between July 2008 and November 2008. Employees who met the eligibility criteria for the study were identified by a member of the company's Human Resources Department and sent relevant information by e-mail ($n = 120$). The information provided emphasized to the potential participants that the research was being conducted independently of the private security company and that taking part was entirely voluntary. It was also made clear that any information collected about participants would be treated as fully confidential and that any identifying information would not be included in the write-up of the study. Nine contractors contacted the researcher expressing their interest in taking part in the study. After further discussion about the research and clarification that respondents met the eligibility criteria, a final sample of seven contractors provided informed consent to take part in the study.

Six interviews were carried out by telephone, and one participant opted to be interviewed at the head office. The interviews lasted between 50 and 75 minutes. The interviews were semistructured and covered a number of areas including (1) employment history, (2) motivations for private security, (3) experiences during deployment, (4) coping strategies, (5) positive and negative aspects of working in private security, (6) attitudes about mental health problems, and (7) attitudes about help seeking. It should be noted that participants

had commonly worked for more than one private security company and, as such, they were asked to discuss their experiences in relation to the industry rather than their current employer. Interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts were analyzed using the IPA in accordance with guidelines suggested by Smith and Osborn.²⁰

In addition to the interviews, participants answered a number of questions about their exposure to potentially traumatic events during their private security work in Iraq. These questions were based on those asked in a number of studies conducted on military personnel.^{7,7a,10} They were included to ascertain whether participants had been exposed to combat experiences known to increase risk of psychiatric difficulties during their employment as contractors. Participants also completed the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12),²¹ a general measure of psychological well-being, and the PTSD Checklist (PCL),²² a measure of posttraumatic stress symptoms.

Reliability and Validity Issues

In line with the guidelines for carrying out qualitative research described by Elliott et al,²³ several "credibility checks" were carried out to protect against potential biases. First, one of the transcripts was coded independently by two of the authors (KM and PS). These analyses were then compared to undertake a consensus review and appraisal of themes. The level of consensus between the analyses was taken to provide some support for the validity of data. Second, once all of the remaining transcripts had been analyzed (by the first author, KM), all of the authors examined the complete analysis and supporting data then met to discuss the credibility of the analysis. Within this process, it was agreed that most of the themes resonated with the data and made sense to the reader. As a further attempt to ascertain the credibility of the analysis, a researcher who was independent to the current study but had previous experience with the IPA acted as an additional analytical "auditor." The auditor was provided with all seven of the interview transcripts, as well as the final master list of themes with accompanying line numbers for relating transcript excerpts. Three quotes for each of the subthemes were chosen at random and checked, enabling the auditor to verify the themes and to check for discrepancies, overstatements, or errors within the analysis. Attention was also given to whether the analysis was grounded in the data, whether there was coherence between themes, and whether the analytic process was appropriately transparent.

In addition to these checks, the first author (KM) recorded prior assumptions about the subject of research, as well as reflections on the interview process, and personal responses to the interview in accordance with guidelines suggested by Moon.²⁴ The authors have also worked toward transparency in the write-up of the analysis to allow the reader to act as an auditor themselves. Extracts from the interviews are presented to illustrate how each theme has been grounded within the data.

RESULTS

Results of Standardized Measures

Unfortunately, psychometric data are not available for one of the participants. (The participant requested to complete this information at a later stage, yet subsequent attempts by the researcher to collect these data were unsuccessful.) The results of the measures indicated that all of the remaining participants had been exposed to a number of potentially traumatic events during private security work. The degree of exposure varied among participants (possibly reflecting their duration of employment as a contractor), but all participants had thought that they might be killed or seriously wounded during private security work ($n = 5$, "many times"; $n = 1$, "twice"). All participants reported being subjected to multiple episodes of potentially traumatic events, such as coming under small arms, artillery,

TABLE 1. Exposure to Potentially Traumatic Events During Private Security Work in Iraq

	Mike	Pete	Tom	John	Simon	Gareth	Dan
Years working in private security	1.5	3.5	0.9	10	...	1	3
Thought might be killed or seriously wounded	May times	Twice	Many times	Many times	...	Many times	Many times
Came under small arms fire	10+ times	2–4 times	10+ times	2–4 times	...	10+ times	10+ times
Came under enemy sniper fire	10+ times	Never	10+ times	Once	...	2–4 times	2–4 times
Saw UK/allied forces killed or wounded	10+ times	Never	10+ times	2–4 times	...	2–4 times	2–4 times
Came under artillery, rocket, or mortar fire	5–9 times	10+ times	Once	2–4 times	...	2–4 times	2–4 times
Had a mate injured or killed nearby	2–4 times		2–4 times	2–4 times	...	2–4 times	2–4 times
Had an improvised explosive device explode nearby	2–4 times	Once	2–4 times	2–4 times	...	2–4 times	2–4 times
Had a close call where a shell, rocket, or missile that failed to explode landed nearby	2–4 times	Once	2–4 times	Once	...	Once	Once
Been shot but was saved by equipment	Never	Never	Never	Never	...	Never	Never
Discharged weapon at enemy	10+ times	Twice	10+ times	Once	...	10+ times	10+ times
Engaged in close-quarter battle with fixed bayonet	Never	Never	Never	Never	...	Never	Never
Been wounded or injured	Once	Never	Once	Never	...	Never	Never
Cleared/searched homes, buildings, caves, or bunkers	2–4 times	Never	5–9 times	10+ times	...	2–4 times	Once
Encountered hostile or aggressive reactions from civilians	5–9 times	Once	10+ times	5–9 times	...	5–9 times	Never
Been threatened but was unable to respond due to rules of engagement	Never	Never	2–4 times	2–4 times	...	2–4 times	Never
Provided aid to the wounded	2–4 times	Never	2–4 times	2–4 times	...	2–4 times	2–4 times
Saw injured or sick women or children but were unable to help	2–4 times	Once	10+ times	2–4 times	...	2–4 times	2–4 times
Handled or uncovered human remains	10+ times	Once	Never	2–4 times	...	2–4 times	Never

and rocket fire; having a friend injured or killed nearby; and having an improvised explosive device (IED) explode nearby. Although the exact numbers of potentially traumatic events experienced by each interviewee cannot be provided because of the nature of the questions asked, the range of events experienced by the participants are outlined (Table 1). Some of the participants described these incidents in more detail during the interviews and will be elaborated on in the next section of the article.

The results of the assessments of psychological well-being indicated that none of the participants reported clinically significant levels of distress at the time of the interview, as measured by the GHQ-12 and the PCL-C.

Results of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Four overarching themes emerged from the analysis. These themes were chosen according to their prevalence within the data and the richness of the transcript extracts to illustrate each theme.²⁰ All of the four themes were recurrent throughout the seven interviews, and each had related subthemes (Table 2).

Theme 1: The Appeal of the Job

The appeal of working in private security related to a number of perceived rewards of the job.

The Lure of Money

One of the most predominant subthemes in this category related to the financial incentives for working in private security:

Tom: Everything to do with private security is the money you get paid ... they call it “pop star’s money.”

TABLE 2. Master List of Superordinate and Subthemes

Superordinate Themes	Subthemes
The appeal of the job	The lure of money Autonomy A desire to be challenged A military identity The buzz
Vulnerability	The scale of the danger The nature of the danger Mistrust The risk of unemployment
Keep going	Not thinking about the danger Faith A sense of personal strength The importance of leave A safe place to talk
Seeking help for stress in the workplace	Reaching out Holding back

Many participants highlighted the difference between the salaries that they earned during their employment with the military and those that they received through private security. For most participants, the financial rewards provided greater security by allowing them to support their families or invest for the future.

Autonomy

Most of the participants described valuing an increased sense of independence, control, and freedom in private security compared with their experiences in the military. A number of different elements seemed to contribute to this increased sense of autonomy, including the freedom to leave at short notice and the greater sense of control over personal safety that it allowed:

Pete: You can basically step out whenever you want . . . you can say “look, I don’t really feel safe with this,” and you can either hand in your 14 days’ notice and go home . . . or if you really feel that bad about it then you can pretty much get out the next day.

The perception of private security as being more egalitarian than the more hierarchical structure of the military also contributed to an increased sense of autonomy in private security work:

Gareth: There’s no rank, there’s no “I’m better than you . . . you do this, you do that” . . . so there’s . . . erm . . . there’s less hierarchy I suppose.

A Desire to Be Challenged

Another aspect of private security work that seemed to be rewarding for some of the participants was the opportunity to be challenged, both physically and mentally:

Tom: You look back when you come back and think “that was a good tour” and you think about all the things that you contended with, like the heat and all the rest of it, and you feel the achievement and feel glad that you’re doing the job.

A Military Identity

For most participants, there seemed to be a strong sense of identification with the military. Many valued a sense of “military comradeship” and described a desire to continue working with similar other individuals from a military background:

Gareth: It’s still sort of military oriented, because it’s all ex-military guys, so you’re still having that military banter.

For some participants, this desire to work with “similar others” seemed to reflect an underlying sense of alienation and separation from civilians and a greater sense of belonging and identification with those from a military background:

Mike: I find it very hard to get on with civvies . . . erm, or people who haven’t been in the Army. [. . .] you try talking to them and they’re not on the same wavelength.

The Buzz

The adrenaline rush that accompanies working in a high-risk environment was described by many participants as one of the rewards of working in private security:

Dan: Some people like to parachute, don’t they? If you’re out there you may get a bit of a buzz from doing that type of work . . . that’s certainly why I do it, you know . . . it’s exciting.

For some participants, the desire for excitement and stimulation in the workplace was also reflected in their accounts of becoming easily bored in previous jobs. Some described valuing the variety and diversity in roles available through private security work:

Pete: You couldn’t get that variation in any other job . . . and the adrenaline rushes . . . there’s just no way that I could get a job in the UK that would give me the same satisfaction.

Theme 2: Vulnerability

One of the major themes that emerged from the analysis of the transcripts related to the various elements of risk and danger that participants spoke of being exposed to during their work in private security.

The Scale of the Danger

All of the participants perceived that there would be a high risk to their personal safety associated with private security work in Iraq:

Mike: [Coming under attack] happens a lot . . . When I first started we were getting IED’d, shot at, I would say every other time that we was going out. I think within my first two rotations I was blown up myself, well my vehicle was blown up three times—but the majority of contractors if you speak to them will say that they’ve been shot at, they’ve been blown up, they’ve—well God knows how many times—I mean my vehicle personally has been blown up three times and I lost a gunner—90% burns on one of them—but in a convoy itself, I’ve been badly involved in roadside bombings or shootings maybe seven or eight times when I’ve been out on the road . . . so, yeah, it happens a lot.

Many compared their experiences with those in the military, and most described a greater sense of vulnerability within private security work:

Simon: Never ever, ever, in my military career did I feel threatened at any time and I would say that within 2 weeks of being in Iraq I’d seen more than I’d seen in my 16½ years in the military.

The Nature of the Danger

Throughout the interviews, the participants described various forms of threat encountered in private security work that contributed to a sense of vulnerability. Many participants described aspects of convoy duty that contributed to a feeling of vulnerability.

Gareth: Not a lot of people like to do convoys because obviously if one vehicle breaks down or a truck stops, then you’ve got to stop, which obviously makes you a big, big target.

In particular, participants spoke of IEDs, which consisted of roadside bombs and suicide car bombs, as posing one of greatest threats to their safety. Mike described his first encounter with such a device:

Mike: When I got hit the first time, by a roadside bomb, it blew my engine out and I had to get towed out of the area . . . and, what can I say? The explosion went off and . . . erm, it disorients you for a couple of seconds . . . it’s the noise, depending on how good the seals are on your doors on your vehicle, you get dust coming in . . . a flash . . . well it blew my motor out and I had to get out of the vehicle to put the tow bar onto the front of the vehicle so that the other vehicle could come in and pull me out . . . and I wasn’t sure whether at that time there was any incoming fire or anything . . . when I got out the vehicle to attach the tow bar my knees started shaking, my hands started shaking and then I’m thinking, “God, is anybody shooting? Is anybody shooting?”

Gareth also described the threat posed by a particularly lethal form of IED design called an explosively formed projectile (EFP). Explosively formed projectiles reportedly strike with enough power to cause pieces of a targeted vehicle’s heavy armor to turn into shrapnel, making them much more deadly than traditional IED weapons.

Gareth: The main [threat] though is the EFP, which is the explosively formed projectile . . . but there’s nothing anyone can do about those really because they’ll penetrate military tanks, so if get one of those you’re sort of 99.9% dead . . . we’ve had a few of those since the 7 months I’ve been working there, we’ve had a few of them and lost a few guys and all that . . . but yeah, the vehicles can sort of stop a roadside bomb but the EFPs, which are dug in, you ain’t got a chance . . .

once it goes off you ain't going to know about it . . . I mean it is a dangerous place and when you go over there is a risk of you not coming back or coming back without your legs or limbs.

Many participants compared the threats faced during private security work with those encountered during their experiences in the military. For many, the primary difference related to the absence of support or backup available to private security contractors in combat situations.

Dan: It's always going to end up more dangerous (than military work) because . . . we don't have the back up . . . so the risk is always going to be higher no matter what job you do or what country you do.

Some of the participants spoke about the aftermath of combat situations and having to handle human remains, including those of their colleagues and friends.

Pete: Part of my job was that we had to deal with the guys that had been killed and injured, whether it be identifying bodies, packing up their kit so it can be shipped on back to their families . . . so I've seen a lot of guys that I've known . . . I could pretty much say that the first 3 years I worked with [the company], I've known everyone that's been killed, I've known every single one of them.

Mistrust

Although trust was viewed to be essential in private security work, all of the participants voiced concerns about trusting others. It was apparent that this mistrust was in relation to particular groups. Many participants described finding it particularly difficult to establish trusting relationships with the local nationals within the teams. This seemed to relate to concerns about the effectiveness of the vetting system in Iraq and reflected an underlying fear that local nationals could be working as undercover terrorists.

Tom: My operations manager tells me . . . he turns around and says "you're doing the most dangerous job in the whole of the world because (1) you're doing convoys in Iraq and (2) you're working with local nationals . . . because any one of them local nationals—because the vetting system in Iraq is not very good—any one of them local nationals could be an undercover whatever he is" . . . and it has happened before . . . you could be out for hours and then "bof"!

The fear that local nationals could be operating as undercover terrorists was not the only barrier to forming trusting relationships with these teammates. In addition, some of the participants described difficulty trusting local nationals due to concerns that they were not skilled or experienced enough or did not have the right characteristics to enable them to do the job effectively. Tom also highlighted the difference in terms of team stability in private security work compared with the military.

Tom: Once you've got your own little set up where you trust the bloke next to you and then [the private security company] breaks that mold and you go somewhere else and you've got to start from scratch again, operating with different people.

The Risk of Unemployment

During the interviews, all of the participants referred to the insecurity of contract work and the fear of unemployment. Most of the participants had experienced periods of unemployment during their careers as private security contractors, and this instability contributed to a sense of vulnerability and fragility.

Tom: Because of the business we're in, basically the contract comes to a standstill . . . they obviously give you 14 days'

notice and then say "sorry, there's no more work" [. . .] it's a bit of a cut-throat business that you're in . . . people say "there's no security in security."

The insecurity of contractual employment was viewed to be in contrast with the stability and comparatively protected employment status within the military. Some of the participants reported that they often carried out jobs that they did not want to do because of the fear that refusal could result in them losing their job or not being reemployed for future contracts. For example, John articulated the pressure that he had experienced in following the orders of clients that he had been assigned to protect for fear of losing his job otherwise.

John: You get clients who say "I'm not going to do this, I'm not going to do that" and all you can do is advise them or else your job will be at risk because he'll report you further down the line and you'll get removed from the contract.

Theme 3: Keep Going

A number of coping strategies and protective factors were perceived by participants as enabling them to cope with the demands and stresses of the job.

Not Thinking About the Danger

Most of the participants spoke about their attempts to avoid thinking about the risks that they were exposed to during their work in private security. Some believed that if they acknowledged the reality of the danger, then they might not be able to continue the work.

Pete: If you start thinking about these things on a daily basis and getting into real deep thought there's no way that you'd carry on, absolutely no way.

A Sense of Personal Strength

Many participants described a sense of personal strength, which they perceived as enabling them to cope with the demands of private security work. Some interviewees suggested that their experiences of coping with trauma that they had previously been exposed to during the military had helped them in private security work. For others, it seemed as though difficult events and experiences in their personal lives had helped them to become more resilient in coping with the risks involved in private security work.

Pete: I think [coping with the job] is down to the individual and their strengths . . . I think it's probably down to personal experience. All my kids, bar the oldest, were born premature . . . She was really, really small and only had about a 45% chance of making it . . . and that to me still brings a lump in my throat for seeing what she's come through, erm, and knowing what could potentially have happened . . . so I think that sort of makes me slightly stronger.

The Importance of Leave

All of the participants described their preference for the pattern of leave rotations within private security compared with those experienced in the military. Leave provided the opportunity for reflection, and some participants viewed this as enabling them to keep going and continue in the job. Some participants suggested that leave helped them to cope by allowing them the opportunity to spend more time with their family.

Simon: I think [spending time with family on leave] helped . . . because obviously I'm with my family, you know [. . .] I see my family and it does sort of rejuvenate you, you know . . . you think "no, this is alright, I'm okay" . . . they've always been supportive, you know?

A Safe Place to Talk

The importance of talking to others about their experiences was highlighted by all of the participants. Many emphasized how essential talking was and suggested that without being able to talk to others, continuing with the job would be difficult, if not impossible. When describing their experiences, importance was given to how and when talking was perceived to be helpful for the participant to feel safe to talk. All of the participants expressed a preference to talk to someone who had been through similar experiences because it was felt that they would be more able to relate to and understand the experiences of the participant. This preference not only seemed to relate exclusively to other contractors but also included others who had been in combat situations, such as military personnel. For example, Pete described being able to confide in his father-in-law.

Pete: He's been in more bloody wars than you could shake a stick at . . . he's ex-special forces, he's now 73 and he's been through a hell of a lot so he can relate to a lot of what I talk about . . . people who have not been in these sorts of situations, I'm not necessarily saying that they don't understand—I think it's more that they can't really grasp the concept of it . . . you, know, people say "I know how you feel", but . . . do you really? Unless you've actually physically felt it, you know what I mean, and seen what it's like, you can't really say I know what you're going through . . . so a lot of the guys tend to just talk about it amongst themselves to be honest.

There tended to be a reluctance among the contractors to share their experiences with those outside of this circle, which seemed to stem from negative experiences of talking to friends and family members in the past.

Simon: I sometimes talk about [stressful incidents at work] with people that I work with—or ex-military or military mates that I still have in the services I'll talk about it with them—but otherwise no . . . I'd rather leave it at work as people don't always understand what you do and will always ask the same stuff, you know, even your family, friends, and mates . . . they just want to know "have you killed anyone" or "have you seen anyone killed" and sometimes you just don't want to answer the questions or talk about it with people that don't really have a clue about what you're doing out there.

Theme 4: Seeking Help for Stress in the Workplace

The final theme that emerged from the interviews related to participants' attitudes toward seeking help for stress. Although none of the participants had personal experience of seeking help for mental health problems, conflicting views about help seeking were apparent among the participants' accounts.

Reaching Out

Tom and Pete, although in the minority, both described being open to the possibility of seeking help in the event that they developed difficulty with their mental health.

Pete: Nobody's a hero [. . .] it takes all sorts of people and if you need to go and speak to somebody then by all means go and do it.

Holding Back

Most participants reported that they would be resistant to seeking help for mental health problems. Many participants seemed to perceive mental health problems as being incompatible with a career in private security. There was a feeling that some of the participants would view mental health problems as a sign that they were no longer capable or suited to the role and would consequently choose to leave private security. Participants described a number of concerns about

the potential consequences of seeking help for mental health problems, which seemed to underlie their resistance to asking for help. Some acknowledged the shame that they would feel due to the belief that seeking help would be a sign of weakness and in contrast to a desired sense of self as resilient.

Simon: I was thinking [of seeking help] after two rotations . . . but it's quite embarrassing, you feel embarrassed, erm, about going in to talk about, you know, stuff that's happened out there . . . and you know, I think it makes you feel a bit weaker you know . . . I like to think "no, I don't need to talk about it," do you know what I mean?

In addition, many participants expressed concern about the impact that seeking help could have on the way that others viewed them, particularly that seeking help would lead others to view them as not being fit to work in private security.

John: If you start asking for help [the private security company] is going to think straight away that you're not fit for work.

In addition, some practical barriers to seeking help were reported by some of the participants. Simon suggested that busy work schedules would pose a challenge in terms of finding the time to ask for help.

Simon: Basically I would say the worst thing would be the leave. I mean it goes so quick, erm, you know because we obviously fly from Baghdad, Dubai, home and a 3-week rotation you basically get about 19 days at home, and it just goes so quick, you don't have time [to seek help].

Some of the participants were also unsure of who they could approach to ask for support for mental health problems, particularly sources of support that would protect their confidentiality.

Mike: Apart from going to my direct bosses I wouldn't know any other way to get any kind of support without anybody knowing about it.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that private security contractors are exposed to a number of stressors (traumatic and otherwise) known to increase risk of psychiatric difficulty in military personnel. In addition, contractors seem to face a number of unique stresses and demands. Nevertheless, despite these risks, the participants in this study did not report experiencing clinically significant levels of psychological distress at the time of the interview. Although a minority of participants were open to seeking help for mental health difficulties, most participants were resistant to seeking help for psychological distress and tended to view a career in private security as incompatible with seeking help for psychiatric difficulties.

In relation to particular challenges, participants highlighted the absence of backup in private security combat situations and a sense of uncontrollability in relation to certain tasks, which may be of significance given the known association between subjective appraisals of trauma and PTSD.⁹ In addition, difficulties forming trusting relationships with local national contractors, a perceived lack of employer-organized support, as well as the potential for unemployment in private security, could all indicate an increased risk for mental health difficulties.^{14,25,26} Interestingly, although interviewees were exposed to such stressors, they did not report significant levels of psychological distress. Indeed, the sample seemed to be coping well with the demands of their job. This was contrary to expectations; it had been anticipated that a certain level of psychological distress would be inevitable among this population. Although this finding might have been due to the potentially biased nature of the sample, it is also possible that a combination of both individual

and environmental factors may have helped to protect the mental health of participants.

It seems likely that those who choose to pursue a career in private security could be a select subgroup of military personnel who are more resilient to the stresses and demands of the job. It is possible that those individuals who struggle to cope with the demands of military life may be less likely to enter into private security and may also be less likely to be recruited by private security companies. Interviewees also reported that not all those entering the profession choose to stay in the role and that some contractors do not cope well with the challenges of the job. This suggests that those who continue to stay working in the profession, including the sample of contractors in the current study, may be an even more select subgroup of those who choose to enter private security. It is also possible that contractors may differ from military personnel about certain demographic characteristics known to be associated with PTSD. Although comparative data were not available for the current study, requirements for working in private security suggest that it is likely that contractors will, on average, be older and higher ranking, factors that are known to be protective of mental health.¹⁰

One of the factors that contractors perceived as enabling them to cope in the face of adversity was “a sense of personal strength.”¹⁵ A growing body of literature has documented the growth and positive life changes that may result from exposure to traumatic incidents.^{27,28} It is possible that coping successfully with such challenges in the past may have led to increased self-efficacy and greater confidence in their ability to cope with stressful situations.

In addition to possible individual factors that may be protective of the mental health of contractors, it is possible that some aspects of the environment in private security may help to mitigate the effects of trauma exposure. Contractors described the increased sense of autonomy that private security was perceived to provide. It is possible that the more egalitarian and less hierarchical nature of private security work could foster more mutually supportive and cohesive relationships, thereby creating a buffer against stress. It is also of note that interviewees appreciated the greater ease of being able to leave private security when they wanted to compared with the military. This could contribute to an increased sense of control over one’s safety in private security, a factor known to reduce the risk of PTSD.²⁹

Another aspect of private security that seemed to help participants to cope with the demands of the job related to the more frequent, but shorter, deployments in private security than in the military. It is known that “operational tempo,” or the pace of military operations, may have mental health consequences for military personnel, with more frequent and longer deployments increasing the risk of psychiatric difficulty.^{30,31} Although contractors are deployed more frequently, the deployments tend to be shorter and allow more “dwell time” at home between one another, a factor that has been found to be protective of mental health in soldiers.³² Drawing on theoretical understandings of stressor duration,³³ it is possible that shorter deployments may protect against stress by allowing for frequent periods of rest and recuperation, thereby protecting the individual from becoming psychologically and physically exhausted. The model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman³³ also suggests that the more frequent deployments experienced by contractors could be protective of mental health because the lack of novelty should reduce the potential negative effects of a stressor. It may also be that previous deployment experience may immunize contractors from the stress of future deployments through the development of coping strategies and appropriate expectations.³⁴

The findings of this study suggest that contractors may use some of the coping strategies that are known to be protective of mental health. For example, all of the interviewees described how talking to others about their experiences had helped them to cope with the demands of the job. A wealth of research has shown that disclosure of

traumatic experiences is associated with less psychological distress in the military³⁵ and the general population.³⁶

Although a combination of individual characteristics and environmental factors may allow some contractors to be resilient to the stresses of the job, the recent study by Feinstein and Botes¹⁷ indicated that a significant minority of contractors experience clinically significant levels of distress. Further research with larger samples is clearly necessary to determine the prevalence of mental health problems in this population and to gain a better understanding of the relative influence of risk and resilience factors on the health and well-being of contractors.

In relation to attitudes about help seeking, the most notable barriers are the perceived stigma and embarrassment in seeking consultation and concerns that help seeking would show them as weak, untrustworthy, and unfit to work. Other barriers to care reported by interviewees related to practical aspects of seeking help, such as difficulties finding the time to access mental health services or not knowing where to access confidential sources of support. The results of this study reflect findings from previous research investigating attitudes about help seeking among both military personnel and the general public, which have demonstrated significant barriers to care.^{4,37} Indeed, the stigma of accessing mental health care has been cited by military personnel as one of the most common reasons for not seeking help, with soldiers operating in forward combat areas tending to report more barriers to care and greater stigma.^{32,38} It is likely that factors believed to amplify resistance to seeking help among military personnel, such as the culture of resilience, courage, and masculine stereotypes, are also likely to be relevant for those working in private security. Indeed, it is possible that there may be even more concern about stigma and discrimination in private security due to the contractual procedures in this industry. Nevertheless, it is of note that not all of the participants were resistant to accessing help. Two participants described being more open to the possibility of seeking help in the event that they developed difficulty with their mental health. This could be further explored in future research with a view to identifying ways of fostering and promoting these attitudes in others.

One of the major limitations of the current study is that the conclusions drawn from these data cannot confidently be generalized to the wider population of contractors. The participants recruited for the current study were predominantly white, expatriate contractors engaged in combat duty or protective security detail in Iraq. Although the findings are likely to resonate with a wider group of contractors, they are unlikely to capture the experiences of all contractors. For example, most contractors working in Iraq are local nationals and it is likely that their experiences of private security work may differ greatly from those of expatriate contractors. It is also acknowledged that there was considerable potential for bias within the recruitment process. When considering the low levels of psychological distress experienced by the current sample, it is important to consider the possibility that those who were coping well with the demands of the job may have been more likely to participate than those who were in psychological distress. In addition, although it was emphasized that information provided would remain anonymous and not allow those taking part in the study to be identified, it is possible that participants may have failed to be convinced that their information would be treated as wholly confidential. This could have resulted in participants underreporting their levels of psychological distress due to fear of stigma and potential job loss should their colleagues or employer learn of their problems.

Although the findings need to be considered in the context of the limitations of the study, several implications for service provision within the field of private security can be drawn. The finding that mistrust between teammates, in particular local nationals, was a substantial concern suggests that private security companies may need to address this issue though interventions designed to increase

levels of trust and cohesion within teams. For example, it may be beneficial for private security companies to keep changes to team formations to a minimum to maintain levels of trust within teams.

In addition, although the potential for unemployment in contract work is unavoidable, private security companies should attempt to minimize this stress for employees and provide contractors with information about possible sources of support in case of financial difficulty. It is also important that contractors are able to voice concerns about their safety without fear of dismissal, and this issue clearly warrants further investigation to ascertain the extent of this problem. Private security companies may need to review organizational policies and practice to ensure that employees are not penalized for voicing concerns about their safety. Private security companies may also need to amend their current provision of support available to contractors experiencing mental health difficulties because it is apparent that, currently, this is viewed as inadequate by some contractors. When considering the optimal delivery of psychological care to this population, it is clear that the numerous barriers to care need to be considered and interventions designed to reduce stigma and other barriers to care should be a priority.

This study highlights a number of similarities between the experiences of private security workers in Iraq and military personnel. It also identifies some of the unique demands and challenges, which include the lack of backup in combat situations, increased challenges to building trust within teams, and greater risks of unemployment. In addition, this study has been the first to explore attitudes about help seeking among contractors. These initial findings have implications for understanding and improving the health and well-being of contractors. In addition, this research has wider implications for theoretical models and frameworks of trauma and highlights the complex role of subjective appraisals in the development of posttraumatic sequelae, a factor known to be fundamental in cognitive models of PTSD.⁹ Indeed, although contractors in this study perceived that there would be a significant threat to life associated with private security work, a factor widely accepted to be one of the best predictors of PTSD,³⁹ this study highlights how little is currently known about this aspect that may interact with other subjective appraisals to increase resilience to PTSD. In addition, previous research has indicated that perceived uncontrollability during trauma increases vulnerability to PTSD,²⁹ yet these findings suggest that the mechanisms by which this appraisal operates may warrant further attention, given the complex nature of perceptions of controllability reported by contractors in this study. It is evident that further research is needed to advance our understanding of the complex interplay of subjective appraisals of trauma and their relative contribution to posttraumatic adjustment. A more sound understanding of the cognitive mechanisms involved in trauma adaptation will aid in the development of theory-informed prevention interventions that may reduce the likelihood that not only contractors but also other at-risk professionals will develop trauma-related psychological difficulties.

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